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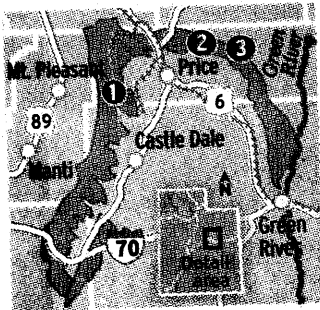
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SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2006

Layoffs at Utah coal mines

UtahAmerican Energy Inc. laid off 114 miners Friday, primarily at its Tower Mine, because of the need to alleviate a buildup of potentially explosive methane gas in its tunnels deep underground.

① Crandall ② Tower ③ West Ridge



RHONDA MAYLETT / The Salt Lake Tribune

Energy

Methane gas level sidelines 114 coal miners

UtahAmerican Energy hopes to return the facility near Price to full production by April

BY MIKE GORRELL
The Salt Lake Tribune

UtahAmerican Energy Inc. "temporarily" laid off 114 coal miners Friday, citing a need to deal with increasingly dangerous levels of explosive methane gas at its Tower Mine seven miles north of Price.

Bruce Hill, UtahAmerican Energy's chief executive, said methane concentrations increased 50 percent during the past four months in the mine, one of North America's deepest with mining operations now more than 2,800 feet beneath the surface. The mine is in the Book Cliffs coal field, which is known to be "gassy," an industry nickname for coal seams that release naturally occurring methane during mining.

"We regret the temporary reduction in employment," Hill said, "but it is unavoidable as we accomplish remediation work to address the methane buildup."

He expressed hope the buildup could be relieved by drilling holes into the

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Coal miners laid off as holiday nears

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subterranean tunnels from above and that full production at the mine could resume by April.

While most layoffs occurred at the Tower Mine, UtahAmerican also gave pink slips to a handful of miners at its two other mines — West Ridge and Crandall Canyon (also known as Genwal).

UtahAmerican is a subsidiary of Murray Energy Corp., which bought Andalex Resources Inc.'s holdings in August. Murray Energy is the largest independent, family-owned coal company in the United States.

The Utah Department of Workforce Services responded to the pre-holiday layoffs with a meeting Friday in Price, where discharged workers could get information about unemployment insurance, counseling, paying bills, dealing with creditors and retraining for another occupation, if desired.

"It's a really tough time to get laid off," noted Susan Sitterud, a supervisor in the department's Emery County Employment Center. "It's going to be a downer."

Hill concurred. "While any reduction in manpower is always unfortunate, we particularly regret the timing of this layoff, being near the holidays," he said. "Our deep

concern for the safety of our employees takes priority over any other consideration."

The danger posed by methane is well-known in Utah's coal country.

A methane buildup triggered a series of July 31, 2000, explosions that killed two miners and injured eight others in the Willow Creek Mine, not far from the Tower operation and in the same coal field. Willow Creek never reopened. Its owner, Cyprus Plateau Mining Corp., decided it was too dangerous to continue and in mid-September of 2000 dismissed 220 workers.

With Utah near full employment and companies seeking experienced miners, Hill said he expects laid-off miners to have little difficulty finding new jobs. He is more concerned

about losing part of his seasoned work force before production can resume.

"Nobody hates this more than we do," Hill said. "We have an agenda to grow this place and we fully intend to. I think we have a plan that is going to work and get these people back to work."

Much of the coal excavated at the three mines goes to the Intermountain Power Agency's two large coal-fired power plants west of Delta. IPA General Manager Reed Searle said he received assurances that UtahAmerican Energy will fulfill its coal-delivery contracts.

"It doesn't have an impact on us," said Searle. "We just hate to see those miners laid off, especially at this time of year."

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